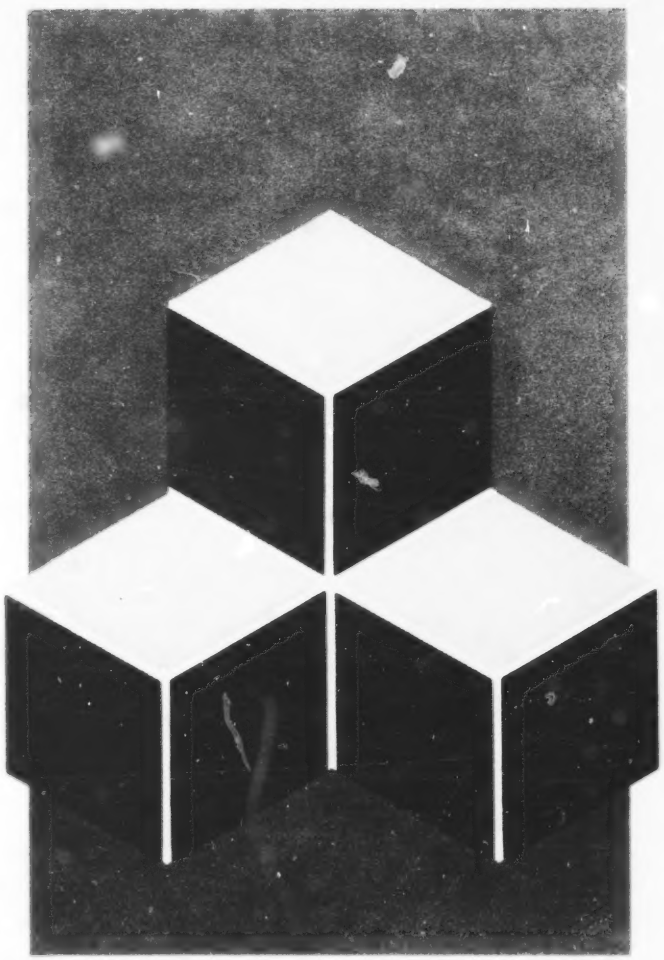
Saskatchewan
Education

Ministerial Consultation Meetings

Summary of Public Responses



Post-Secondary Review

87-03162/

Toward a New Mandate

When Premier Devine appointed me Minister of Advanced Education and Manpower in November, 1986, part of my mandate was to bring forward proposals to strengthen adult education and training in Saskatchewan. This mandate reflects the Government's firm conviction that a healthy post-secondary system is essential to Saskatchewan's social and economic development.

Six months is a short time, but the deadline was necessary given the urgency of the task.

In order to get the job done, I needed to talk, and more importantly to listen, to as wide a variety of opinions and interests as I could.

Consequently, representatives of businesses, corporations, interest groups, school boards, municipalities and educators from both the K-12 and post-secondary systems were invited to a set of consultation meetings. There were 20 of these meetings held across the province in February, March and early April of this year.

From these meetings, I received some extremely constructive and useful advice, and I came away with a clear message about how people in Saskatchewan want adult education to be strengthened. The key themes that I heard at virtually every meeting were:

1. Access to adult education for all groups and regions in the province should be expanded. A particular need is a policy on distance education.

2. One of the most important functions of the adult education system is to prepare people for their working careers. Many employers feel there should be a closer relationship with business and industry.

3. The inability of many graduates to express themselves clearly and think for themselves emerged as a major issue.

4. Concern was expressed that the post-secondary education system is too narrowly focused toward new entrants to the work force. The needs of older workers for retraining must be given more attention.

5. The government spends approximately $250 million a year on adult education through a complex system of institutes, universities, community colleges and private training firms. There was a clear message that we have to work harder at getting full value for the money spent. Better management and more accountability is the issue here.

The following is a summary of the points that were made at the meetings. Although choices remain to be made with respect to how much can be accomplished, I will be acting on this advice in the immediate future.

My appreciation and sincere thanks to all those who contributed to the consultations.

Lorne H. Hepworth, Minister
Saskatchewan Education
(Advanced Education and Manpower)

The Demand for Greater Access

There was overwhelming evidence from the consultation meetings that Saskatchewan residents believe that improving access to adult education for all groups and regions in the province must be a cornerstone of a new mandate. People want access to a broad range of programs as near as possible to where they live and work, and to the necessary supports that will enable them to take full advantage of those opportunities.

Overcoming Distances

Access to adult education for residents who do not live in the province's major centres was discussed at every meeting. Representatives from rural and northern Saskatchewan described the impact of limited access to adult education in their communities. Key concerns include the disproportionate cost that individuals must bear to travel to and live in other locations, the loss of skilled workers as young people leave and do not return, and overall lower participation and success rates in programs.

Many rural residents expressed the view that improvements in extension programming from the universities and technical institutes might be a desirable approach. For example, providing first and perhaps second year arts and science courses off-campus could reduce the costs of adult education to rural students and would ease enrollment pressures in Regina and Saskatoon.

The financial implications of offering adult education outside the major cities figured prominently at most meetings. Many representatives questioned why more courses cannot be run on a cost-recovery basis, even if higher tuition fees have to be charged. In the words of one participant, paying for more access is better than no access.

Distance education, or the application of advanced communication technologies to deliver programs, was seen as a new solution to overcoming the geographic barriers facing adult learners in Saskatchewan. A wide range of applications was proposed, including upgrading for professionals, agricultural programs for farmers , language training provided by cultural groups, and staff training sponsored by the private sector.

Overcoming Social Inequalities

There was a strong plea that we must address the needs of groups who traditionally have not participated fully and equally in post-secondary education. Participants from organizations representing women, natives and people with disabilities spoke poignantly of adult education as a still distant objective. Yet higher education is often the only option for these groups to achieve a decent quality of life.

To use a phrase expressed at one of the meetings, the system will have "to bend" to improve access for non-traditional groups. Despite efforts to provide special measures or additional assistance, we are still not getting the job done.

In the opinion of some representatives, adult education will only become responsive to their needs if they can assume greater control over programs. Native leaders have taken this approach. The benefits of improving the representation of women in management positions in adult education was also advocated.

The Need for Life-long Training

A major emerging issue is the need for access to retraining and upgrading for adults who are already in the work force, and who may have left the formal education system years ago. Many representatives at the meetings predicted that, as our population ages and technological change accelerates, demands for retraining will become critical.

To prepare for this demand we will have to restructure programs to accommodate students who have full-time jobs. Financing this on-going requirement for upgrading of skills is an issue for both employees and employers. Tax incentives were proposed as one way of funding retraining.

Matching Education and Jobs

Literacy

A foremost concern on the part of employers is the inadequate level of literacy and numerical skills possessed by graduates. This problem was raised at every meeting. Many employers spoke with frustration at the inability of some graduates to think for themselves, write clearly, or perform tasks independently. There was a clear signal for adult educators to get together with the K-12 system on this issue.

Quality and Standards

A focus on "the basics" is also required in the technical institutes and universities. Some employers noted that business is providing considerable training on-the-job to graduates and questioned whether this is really their responsibility. Many representatives also stressed the need for skills that provide a foundation for future learning throughout a person's working life. The appropriate balance may lie in the approach put forward by one participant - public institutions should teach people the basic skills that business cannot (for example, how to read, write and think) rather than things which can be taught in a couple of days, such as computer software applications.

The relationship between post-secondary institutions and employers represents another area where participants saw some gaps. Many felt that current mechanisms for direct industry input into programs are inadequate, and must be strengthened if training and job requirements are to achieve a better match. The point was also raised that too little attention is paid to teaching some of the fundamentals of business operations such as accounting, marketing and management.

Employers and community representatives identified many fields where they believe Saskatchewan is experiencing labour shortages. The question was raised about how the adult education system ought to identify and respond to changes in the labour market. Improved forecasting, particulary with regard to major projects, was mentioned. However, most were cautious about being overly reactive to short-term needs that may not represent the province's long-term interests.

Career Guidance

In discussing the match between education and jobs, many participants focused on the need to find a balance between people's career aspirations and the jobs that are going to be available. Current career services in the province were perceived as being inadequate for this task. Participants thought that career counselling services should also provide better information and should be strengthened in the K-12 system.

Co-op Education

Educational opportunities beyond the classroom were a recurring issue. A primary consideration was strengthening the relationship between institutional education and training through on-the-job work experience. Co-operative work/study programs, the apprenticeship model and the granting of academic credits for training on-the-job were all strongly advocated. However, some concerns were expressed regarding the flexibility, accessibility and portability of apprenticeship training in meeting the needs of the north.

Managing More Efficiently

The relationship between the province's universities, technical institutes and community colleges was often questioned. There is a perception that activities and mandates appear to be confusing, competing and overlapping. While essential distinctions in the roles of the different institutions were recognized, many participants suggested that benefits could be realized through greater coordination and specialization. Issues mentioned ranged from confusion over extension policies to the lack of a common approach to course credits or admission procedures.

The relationship between post-secondary education and the K-12 system appeared to many to have broken down. In the minds of many members of the public, the two systems should be involved in a continuous educational process, rather than operating wholly independently of one another. Sharing of resources at the local level was a common concern. The under-utilization of comprehensive schools, some of which could be used for providing technical or vocational programs, was given as an example of a missed opportunity for co-operation.

Private and non-profit organizations urged the government to look beyond traditional public institutions to find new solutions. The legitimate role of these organizations and the benefits of co-operative ventures were stressed in many forums. The role of the voluntary sector in providing alternative learning options was also emphasized.

Responsiveness to Change

The inability of post-secondary institutions to react quickly to changing demands was a theme that surfaced at virtually every meeting. The issue was as much a concern to representatives from post-secondary institutions themselves as it was to business and the public. The problem was described in terms of attitude - an "inward looking" philosophy that does not encourage change or flexibility. Management structures and procedures that limit the ability of public institutions to respond to new demands were also cited.

The technical institutes feel themselves impaired by government regulations which are seen as "double-approval" processes. The Department of Education has the authority to approve programs, but responsibilities for responding to new demands and solving problems rest with the institutes. The need for improvements in turnaround time for developing new courses was stressed by all participants.

In contrast, the community colleges were often cited for their effectiveness in working with employers to deliver programs tailored to their needs. Many interest groups want to see the colleges used more for skill training and updating because of their flexibility and unique role in rural and northern Saskatchewan.

The potential of the colleges, however, is viewed by some to be limited by their image and ambiguous place in the adult education system. Some participants, for example, see the colleges as primarily responding to demands for personal interest, social or recreational programs. Others stressed skill development and extension credit programs as more important roles for the colleges.

Education and Community Organizations

Many participants thought that the contribution of community organizations to adult education needs more recognition and support. They emphasized the influence of the arts in contributing to the quality of life in communities. The role of voluntary organizations in providing training and in meeting the educational needs of specific target groups, such as immigrants and ethnic minorities, was also stressed.

Representatives from community organizations outlined ways to strengthen their contribution, including the delivery of language and cross cultural programs. The point was made that the adult education system could further support community organizations by developing training programs which meet the specific needs of these groups.

Conclusion

In total, 20 meetings were held across the province in 11 locations. Over 500 people attended with a number submitting written briefs. Although many different issues were raised, there appeared to be a consensus around five main themes. These were:

1. Access to adult education for all groups and regions in the province should be expanded. A particular need is a policy on distance education.

2. One of the most important functions of the adult education system is to prepare people for their working careers. Many employers feel there should be a closer relationship with business and industry.

3. The inability of many graduates to express themselves clearly and think for themselves emerged as a major concern.

4. Concern was expressed that the post-secondary education system is too narrowly focused toward new entrants to the work force. The retraining needs of older workers must be given more attention.

5. The government spends approximately $250 million a year on adult education through a complex system of institutes, universities, community colleges and private training firms. There was a clear message that we have to work harder at getting full value for the money spent. Better management and more accountability is the issue here.

These themes will play a major part in new programs and policies currently under development.